

## In search of an encore career

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Frank Reece scored big in the soaring telecommunications industry of the 1990s. He built his own equipment sales and service company and took it from a small, New England service provider to a nationwide sales network, then sold it near the top of an overheated market.

Then a succession of shocks knocked loose Reece's moorings. His next venture, a communications company, didn't survive the dot-com bust. His mother died. He nearly died himself after rupturing his Achilles tendon. The injury led to blood clots in his leg and a series of pulmonary embolisms, requiring months of convalescence and rehabilitation. "There was a certain sense of financial achievement that I was after," he says, "and I practically killed myself pursuing it."

At 55, the athletic overachiever found himself wandering in a fog. "When you close the book on one career and you haven't opened the book on another, there is a sense of regret, loss, a confusion about what to do," Reece says. "I didn't know how to label myself. I didn't know what to put on a business card."

I've got 30 more years to live, Reece remembers telling himself. How do I want to excel for the next 30 years?

Eventually, Reece found his second calling in the non-profit sector. He took a job as the head of the Global Habitat Project, which helps teens in Boston high schools produce an environmental newsletter for tens of thousands of elementary and middle school students.

"I decided it was time for me to stop only making a living and to start making a difference," he says. "It was time to do more."

Reece and millions of others are on the front line of an enormous social transformation. Neither young nor old, they are closing a chapter in their lives and in their work, yet stand decades away from anything resembling traditional old age. They face not only the question of what's next, but also who they are now. Betty Friedan, writing about women seeking a new identity in the early 1960s, talked about the problem that has no name. This is the population with no name. Are they seniors, elders, retirees? Address them as such and they will refer you to their parents.

It has become commonplace to hear that boomers are reinventing retirement. But the important story is that something new is being invented. Men and women are moving beyond midlife yet refusing to phase out or fade away. They are crafting a new phase of work that offers not only continued income but also the promise of more meaning - and the chance to do work that means something beyond themselves.

There is no statistical record of this incipient movement yet, but there are countless stories. Robert Chambers left his job as a used-car salesman to create a better way for poor people in New Hampshire to buy fuel-efficient cars. Martha Rollins, a former antique dealer, now runs a non-profit that provides job opportunities for ex-offenders in Richmond, Va. Mike Mulqueen, a retired Marine Corps general, took over the food depository in Chicago, transforming it into one of the most successful food banks in the country. After decades as a middle manager in large corporations, Leslie Hawke joined the Peace Corps and traveled to Romania; when her assignment ended, she stayed to start a non-profit, helping children and families thrive. Ed Speedling left 30 years as a hospital executive and academic to help solve the problem of homelessness in Philadelphia.

As these people in their 50s and 60s demonstrate, we are in the midst of fashioning a new stage of life between the traditional midlife years and careers, and true retirement and old age. It is a development that is distinct, significant and historic.

### The new 60

It is a mistake to see it as more of midlife as we know it, an update version of retirement, or the new old age. It is what it is, and, most of all, what people decide to make of it. It is big: as long as midlife, decades in duration. And it is uncertain, as the population explosion among those entering this work in progress means tens of millions of boomers find themselves navigating uncharted territory.

Sixty isn't the new 40, or the new 30. It's the new 60, and the sooner we recognize that we are entering fresh territory, shaping a new stage of life and work, the more quickly progress will come in grasping the possibilities of this new period.

The persistence of a "retirement" mindset has hampered the development of new approaches and opportunities. In social science terms, it's a classic example of a "structural lag" that keeps cultural conceptions and social institutions stuck in an earlier era even

as realities change dramatically.

We need to be liberated from artificial notions such as "retirement age" and the oxymoronic concept "working in retirement." We need to be liberated, too, from such dreary and bloodless phrases as "older workers" and "mature workers." This is not a call for euphemisms, but rather for precision and accuracy.

The truth is that the vast majority of individuals in this stage of life are neither retired nor anything approximating old. They have neither the desire to go off to the sidelines nor in many cases the financial ability to stop working altogether.

It's time to create a new category of thinking and a new language: the encore stage and the encore career.

In her way, Beverly Ryder is used to being among the first. She was part of the first large entering class of African American students at Stanford University. She was part of the first significant group of women to get MBAs and move in meaningful numbers into new management positions in the corporate world. Now she is among the first wave of baby boomers to enter a new stage of life and work, looking for more.

In the 1990s, Ryder moved back to her hometown, Los Angeles, to take a senior management job with Edison International. Once home, she felt a strong pull to do something to improve the quality of the local public schools - something that would bring more resources to the system and, somehow, begin to reduce the district's 50 percent dropout rate. "I grew up in Los Angeles. I went to public schools here. The L.A. schools helped make me what I am," Ryder says. "Why can't that be done today?"

For a dozen years, Ryder worked for Edison while serving on non-profit boards and volunteering with civic associations. Eventually, she left the corporate world and went to work at Crenshaw High School, then for the Los Angeles Unified School District, helping to create a new office to shape the many partnerships the district and individual schools were forming with private companies. Last year, Ryder applied to and was accepted by the Broad Academy, a program that prepares leaders from the private sector, the military and the non-profit world to become urban public school superintendents.

Ryder could be contemplating retirement after a 30-year career in the private sector. But despite the temptation of a vacation, endless vacation isn't what she wants at this stage in her life. "We lived for a while, had fun, raised families," Ryder says of her generation. "Now we can go back and do what we really wanted to do."

Like so many other boomers in their 50s and 60s, Ryder wasn't looking to stop working; she was looking for a different relationship to work. Instead of phasing out, Ryder and others in the second half of life are focusing in, attempting to find more from work, not less. They want "encore careers" that combine needed income, a search for personal fulfillment and a desire to make a real impact.

The encore career is not a retirement job. It's not a transitional phase. It's not a bridge between the end of real work and the beginning of real leisure. It's not leftover time to be killed. It's an entire stage of life and work - a true body of work, one that could last 10, 15, 20 years or longer.

Extended lifespans fundamentally change conventional thinking about career arcs. Those retooling for a decade or longer can justify going back to school, getting training, or moving to a new location. They can allow themselves time to make a few mistakes before finding the right fit. They can even pursue a second encore career or, eventually, true retirement.

### **A new vision of work**

But where will boomers find their encore careers? For the most part, those in the second half of life have been all dressed up with few places to go. We have discounted their experience. We have made it difficult to find work that's personally meaningful and that makes a significant contribution to the well-being of the country. As a result, we're missing what might well be one of the big opportunities of the 21st century.

To capture this windfall of time, talent and experience, we're going to need to be every bit as creative as we were in the last century when we tried to convince people to leave the workplace. We are going to need to be as bold as we were when we developed Social Security, as innovative as we were when we created retirement communities and senior centers and other kinds of social institutions. And we are going to need to come up with a vision of work in this new century that will not only prod people to work a little longer but will inspire them to develop an entirely new phase of their working lives - an encore career that benefits not only individuals, but also amounts to a windfall for communities.

When we do, we will create a society that balances the joys and responsibilities of contribution across the generations - in other words, one that works better for all of us.

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